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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses demographic, technological and other factors influencing adult career development and describes new career services, assessment instruments, and interventions for adults. Problems with research in the area of adult career development are noted. (MCF)

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HIGHLIGHTS ...An ERIC/CAPS Fact Sheet

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Adult Career Development: An Overview

Adult Career Development: even a decade ago this topic would have generated little debate or interest. Traditional wisdom said that individuals chose careers in their late teens and early 20's and pursued them until retirement. Career planning, if any, occurred in high school.

While the study of career development stopped at age 18, the few theorists who looked at adults tended to use such non-development concepts as maintenance, stabilization, stagnation and decline. Today, however, attitudes, practices and theories are changing, and career planning professionals are being asked to provide assistance to people of all ages and at all stages of career development.

Demographic Factors

The need for adult career planning services is due, in large part, to demographic factors. Life expectancy has increased from 47 years in 1900 to 74 today. The "baby boomers," born 1946-1964, have flooded into the labor market. The number of people aged 65 and older has also increased — by 35% in the last two decades. Over 30,000 Americans are over 100; 2.2 million over 85 (Hodgkinson, 1984).

The impact of women on educational institutions and the paid labor force has been significant. In 1950 fewer than 5% of all women aged 25 and older possessed college degrees; in 1980, 13% did (Spain & Nock, 1984). "Older" women (35 +) outnumber older men by almost 2 to 1 in their return to institutions of higher education, and the enrollment of both older groups has increased to 36.8% in five years (Magarrell, 1981). Women's pursuit of professional degrees has also shown a sharp increase in the last three decades; for example, from 4% to 30% in the field of law (Spain & Nock, 1984).

In the labor force, the number of women has increased 109% since 1960, compared to 36% for men. It is predicted that by 1995, 80% of women aged 20-45 will be working in the paid labor force. Women with children under age six have increased their participation from 19% in 1960 to 50% in 1983 (Robey & Russell, 1984).

Technological and Other Factors

More job titles are available today — 40,000 with the last census — and many of them did not exist when current adult workers were making initial career decisions. The fastest percentage gains occur predominantly in the high-tech fields: computer service technicians up 96.8%, computer systems analysts up 85.3%, programmers up 76.9%, and operators up 75.8% (Robey & Russell, 1984).

Other factors creating the need for adult career planning services include: legal changes, such as affirmative action and mandatory retirement laws; psychological concerns about meaning and identity in work; and economic circumstances requiring dual-career or dual-paycheck couples. The traditional pattern of the bread-winning father, the homemaking mother, and two or more school-aged children accounted for only 11% of families in 1980, compared to 60% in 1955.

Theoretical Perspectives

A small but growing body of theory has begun to form around adult development, with a range of viewpoints about whether developmental issues arise from chronological age, stage, or idiosyncratic response to trigger points. On the basis of extensive research with 40 men, some investigators found a low age-variability between developmental periods (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). Other researchers believe that the crucial factor is society's timing for certain life events and individuals' assessment of being "on-time" or "off-time" (Neugarten, 1968).

In one recently developed model for analyzing adult adaptation to various transitions, the components include: (1) characteristics of the transition, (2) characteristics of the individual, and (3) characteristics of the environment (Schlossberg, 1984). In this perspective, developmental change is less a matter of the change itself and more a matter of the person's *perception* of the change.

Crites (1981) and Super (1983) have also extended their theories to describe adult stages and concerns more accurately, and Rhodes and Doering (1983) have provided a theoretical model that helps one understand the motivations involved in adult career changes. Holland's new book (1985) summarizes well the idea that career changes can appropriately be regarded as efforts to increase the congruence between the person and the work environment.

Problems With the Research

Research in the area of adult development has been extremely limited to date. The most effective research would be longitudinal, which is difficult and expensive to conduct. As a result, most of the research done thus far has been confined to survey and self-report.

Another difficulty with the research has been its predominantly male focus. In the midst of conjecture and early findings, there are indications that male models of adult development may not be appropriate for females, especially childbearing females.

Gilligan (1982) challenges counselors to examine the basic models and perspectives for the "invisible biases" they may hold. She warns practitioners not to assume that the male pattern of human development is the "right" pattern. Her research is an important contribution to aid in critiquing adult development theory for both women and men.

An understanding of adult development theory is important to practitioners in the formation of career planning services for adults. For no matter how diverse the viewpoints, they present important information about the normalcy and stress of change.

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New Service Agencies

As new groups are seeking career services, new agencies are emerging to attend to unique and different concerns. Colleges and universities are expanding career services for adults coming or returning to school, but they account for only one-fifth (12 million) of the total number of adults being educated today.

Forty-six million adults are being educated by other agencies or by employers. The federal government, for example, participates through the military, equity legislation for women and minorities, programs for attracting women into nontraditional occupations, national and state information systems, reemployment programs, displaced homemaker centers, and college reentry programs.

Business and industry now spend between $30 and $40 billion on the education and training of adults. These adults are not seeking more of the same services provided to adolescents, but services unique to their own needs. Career planning services in the workplace, a redefinition of employee assistance programs to include career services, assessment centers in business and even in shopping centers, outplacement centers and the like are all logical extensions of a changing population seeking new services.

The problems presented by these individuals are also different, and a taxonomy of adult career problems has emerged. Campbell and Cellini (1981), for example, categorize problems in terms of organizational-institutional performance and/or adaptation. As a result, new diagnostic instruments, assessment tools and interventions become necessary for counselors.

Diagnostic and Assessment Instruments

At least three, relatively new diagnostic instruments have been developed to help interpret one's vocational status: My Vocational Situation (Holland, Daiger, & Power, 1980); The Vocational Decision Scale (Jones & Chenery, 1980); and The Career Decision Scale, (Osipow, Carney, & Barak, 1976). Appropriate assessments for adults have to take into account that these individuals are often years removed from their formal schooling systems and need to incorporate work experience into their planning. The assessment of prior learning and identification of skills that one can transfer from one job to another are examples of this appropriateness. Job-stress related instruments, self-directed instruments (e.g., Self-Directed Search, Quick Job Hunting Map, Career Decision Making System, Micro-SKILLS), and computerized assessments are also appropriate. However the assessment process is defined, it is important to recognize that adults prefer maintaining control and exercising personal input.

New Interventions

What is new is exemplified by the computerized interventions being marketed to adults. American College Testing introduced an adult version of DISCOVER (1984), and Educational Testing Service modified their SIGI (System, 1984) to address adult concerns. Skill assessment, resume writing and job interviewing, job stress exercises, people management tasks, and general personal development ideas are some of the available software. Online assessments and interactive interventions for particular skills are commonplace and improving all the time. It will be important for counselors to help adults sort out the most effective programs for them.

Counselors will also play an increasingly important role with adults as they move into more interactions with computers. How best to do that will remain an issue, especially as computers become part of the home market. For example, many self-directed programs are anything but self-directed and only increase the need for assistance; adults may prefer self-directed learning only if accompanied by one-to-one services.

Networking is of demonstrable importance to adults, as are workshops and other events or programs that facilitate networking. Mentoring is also being promoted as it is better understood. Where these interventions are seen as increasing job morale or performance, more attention will be paid to the outcomes.

Professional counselors working with this type of adult client will need to read regularly, attend inservice workshops, and generally stay involved with resource people and programs as counseling approaches are further refined. In addition to new publications and ongoing journal coverage, AACD's interest group on adult development and aging and state or local networks are excellent sources of support.

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Note: In addition to these references, a list of recommended materials is available upon request. Please direct inquiries to ERIC/CAPS User Services, 2108 School of Education, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259 (313/764-9492).

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